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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001773

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR AMBRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH DAS HALE, MIKATI CALLS HIZBALLAH A  
"TUMOR" NEEDING REMOVAL

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati told visiting NEA DAS Hale and the Ambassador that Sunni leader Saad Hariri, with whom Mikati acknowledged seeking an electoral alliance, would win the Tripoli district in Lebanon's 2009 parliamentary elections. Mikati said he would refuse the position of prime minister absent backing of the Sunni population and acknowledged that Hariri would likely be Lebanon's next prime minister. On President Sleiman, Mikati expressed concern that the LAF and the Maronite Patriarch -- traditional stalwarts of support for the president -- were not 100 percent behind Sleiman. DAS Hale emphasized the need to support Sleiman -- who has proven himself independent-minded and supportive of UNSCR 1701 and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon -- despite imperfect conditions.

2. (C) Describing Hizballah several times during the December 18 meeting as a "tumor," Mikati said the group's mini-state must be removed in order to preserve Lebanon. He noted that diplomatic relations with Syria were purely "cosmetic" but argued better relations with Lebanon's neighbor provided the GOL space to counter Hizballah. Hale agreed that relations between the two sovereign neighbors was important, but must be based on mutual respect and non-interference. Mikati opined that Hizballah's ultimate goal in Lebanon was to create an Iranian military base on the Mediterranean from which Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution could be carried to the west. Mikati called Russia's recently-announced gift of MIG-29 fighter planes "strange." End summary.

"BLOOD OF HARIRI" STILL  
IN TRIPOLI

3. (C) In a December 18 meeting with visiting NEA DAS David Hale and the Ambassador, accompanied by NEA/ELA Desk Officer Matthew Irwin and Econoff, former Prime Minister Najib Mikati said he expected the 2009 parliamentary elections to be tough only in certain areas, specifically the Metn, west Bekaa, and Zahle. Akkar and Mina would go entirely to Hariri, Mikati assessed. He acknowledged that "because I exist," there will

be a fight in Tripoli. However, Mikati -- who described himself as not a "man of fighting" -- said "the blood of (assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq) Hariri still exists" in Tripoli and Saad Hariri would take the electoral district. DAS Hale noted that Lebanon's independence was a priority for the U.S.

14. (C) Mikati expected 70 percent of the Tripoli population would back Hariri; the other 30 percent Mikati described as those whose votes are for sale. While admitting he had no desire for a slot for himself on the Hariri list, Mikati said he was trying to join forces with Hariri. Mikati said he could not go against the popular sentiment in the north favoring Hariri. On northern Lebanon's other major Sunni politicians, Mikati said he had heard Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammed Safadi was trying to build bridges to former Prime Minister Omar Karami.

#### NO PM POST WITHOUT SUNNI BACKING

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15. (C) On post-election cabinet scenarios, Mikati assessed that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora was "expired." Describing Siniora as a friend whom he respects, Mikati, nonetheless, said Siniora should take a break from the position. Mikati tallied a checklist to determine Hariri's potential as prime minister. He assessed Hariri wanted the slot but wondered whether Saudi Arabia wanted Hariri in the post. Mikati offered a hesitant yes to his own rhetorical question on Hariri's capabilities for the position. The job was challenging; the person chosen would need to build the state

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again, Mikati said. According to Mikati, Hariri is the most likely candidate for prime minister after the 2009 elections.

16. (C) Responding to a question about the prime minister post in the event of a March 8 victory, Mikati said he would refuse the position under the circumstances because he would not be representing the Sunni population. Citing the unsuccessful governments of Salim Hoss and Omar Karami, Mikati said becoming prime minister without the full support of the Sunni community would always result in failure. Mikati said he was "not ready to fail." He mentioned former Prime Minister Abdul-Rahim Mrad as a potential PM in a March 8-dominated government. DAS Hale acknowledged the need for Sunni backing of any prime minister -- who is the highest Sunni representative in government -- and stressed the importance of avoiding candidates such as Mrad in the post.

#### HESITATION ON SLEIMAN

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17. (C) Describing President Michel Sleiman as quiet and unchallenging, Mikati said he had not yet seen in Lebanon the results of Sleiman's efforts, domestically or from his many trips abroad. However, Mikati assessed Sleiman was trying to demonstrate his wisdom and judgment before serving as arbitrator, the traditional role of Lebanon's presidents. According to Mikati, once Sleiman is arbitrator, he can govern. Nonetheless, Mikati described as "worrisome" a December 17 conversation with Sleiman in which the President said his job was easier than what he had expected. Mikati told DAS Hale and the Ambassador he had counseled Sleiman to create strong state institutions to counter Hizballah's mini-state.

18. (C) The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Maronite Patriarch, traditional strongholds of presidential support, are not stalwartly pro-Sleiman, according to Mikati. He described the LAF as polarized toward March 8 with most officers supporting Hizballah and opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun. Mikati described Sleiman as unsure he had the LAF's full support. Fear of fracturing the army had probably also prevented then LAF Commander Sleiman from taking any drastic decision between 2005 and 2008, Mikati said.

¶9. (C) On the traditional buttress of support for the president from the Patriarch, Mikati ceded that Sfeir was "not in love with Sleiman." DAS Hale opined, however, that despite these concerns President Sleiman seemed to recognize he had more room for maneuvering than his predecessor. Sleiman had demonstrated support for Lebanon's independence, adherence to UNSCR 1701, and progress on the Hariri tribunal, DAS Hale said. Despite his operating in an imperfect situation, President Sleiman still deserved support.

HIZBALLAH:  
A "TUMOR" IN THE STATE  
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¶10. (C) Mikati, speaking as a "statesman," argued Lebanon could not survive with a Hizballah mini-state. Regardless of his personal views on the group, Mikati said he was expecting Hizballah to bring Lebanon to a "sad ending." He assessed that Hizballah was just like a tumor that, whether benign or malignant, must be removed. While acknowledging weakening the group would take time, DAS Hale agreed that a non-state entity with the power of creating war and peace in Lebanon was tremendously dangerous. He supported enacting multiple policies and employing multiple tools to confront the group and to make Hizballah's backers see more liabilities in their support than assets. Continuation of the National Dialogue would also help counter Hizballah.

¶11. (C) On Hizballah's goals in Lebanon, Mikati assessed Iran was using the group to create a military base on the Mediterranean. Ayatollah Khomeini's goal to export the Islamic revolution to the west required a launching point, which, according to Mikati, is Lebanon. This goal will take time but Hizballah is patient, he said. DAS Hale told Mikati that peace with Israel was the most direct way to counter

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such intentions. Mikati agreed that peace with Israel would be a "happy ending," but questioned whether Syria would make an agreement without Iranian permission.

¶12. (C) Mikati expressed doubt that upcoming parliamentary elections, regardless of a March 14 or opposition victory, would change Lebanon's tumorous "reality." DAS Hale stressed, however, that a Hizballah-dominated government would significantly change the country's internal situation and potentially the U.S. stance toward the GOL. DAS Hale emphasized preservation of a pro-independence cabinet, even if not all the ministers are March 14.

"NEUTRALIZE" SYRIA THROUGH  
DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS  
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¶13. (C) Mikati called diplomatic relations with Syria "cosmetic," but important. He emphasized the need to keep Lebanon's interests a priority, but assessed that "neutralizing" the Syrian track made completing work simpler in Lebanon. While acknowledging the need for good state-to-state relations between the neighbors, DAS Hale said Syria's faction-based support of Lebanese politicians was unacceptable. Noting the visits of Lebanon's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Interior, and LAF Commander, and the upcoming visit of Minister of Defense Elias Murr, Mikati assessed the Syrians had chosen the particular "island" of coordination they sought in Lebanon. Mikati argued that neutralizing Syria would enable the GOL to "gain time" on Hizballah.

CONCERNED ABOUT GOL DEBT  
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¶14. (C) Responding to DAS Hale's inquiry about the state of the Lebanese economy, Mikati said that, looking at loans from commercial banks, the Lebanese economy was doing well.

However, Mikati expressed concern about government debt --projected to reach \$9.5 billion next year -- held in commercial banks. He argued some of the short-term government loans should be negotiated to long-term loans. Additionally, a shortage of transfers from abroad could cause liquidity problems in Lebanon. The transfer of dollars into Lebanese pounds -- which yield much higher interest rates -- would also reduce bank liquidity. However, Mikati expressed confidence in Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh and his handling of the issues.

A "STRANGE" GIFT FROM THE RUSSIANS  
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¶15. (C) Talking with the Ambassador before DAS Hale's arrival, Mikati described the Russian gift of MIG-29 fighter planes -- which received extensive local media coverage in recent days -- as "strange." He questioned whether Defense Minister Murr asked specifically for the planes or if the Russians had chosen independently to offer them. Mikati said the planes would be "impossible" to maintain and small helicopters would have been more useful for the LAF.

¶16. (C) Comment: Mikati clearly was presenting himself for our benefit as a foe of Hizballah, as he is looking forward to potential opportunities to return to the Prime Ministry. End comment.

¶17. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

SISON